

Video Poems

Seeking Insight

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As soon as you establish a rhythm skating . . .
you've got something that you can
metaphorically just zone out on, take off on.
The whole thing becomes one giant poem.¹

My enduring curiosity as an artist, researcher, and educator focuses on how we generate the myriad of artistic practices that enliven our cultures and how and what we learn from those creative engagements. While my personal experience and point of view are involved in pursuing these roles, the broader ideas and theoretical perspectives of academic and cultural discourses inform my understanding of my practice and enable me to interrogate my subjective experiences of artistic inquiry more intensely and in a broader context. The pervasive challenge is to translate my understanding of artistic practice into the scholarly and social practices of researching and teaching in forms and processes that respect the integrity of artistic practice. How can I understand my artistic work in ways that will promote insight into the creative experiences of others and how might I represent the concepts that intrigue me in fitting artistic forms? Perhaps I

1 PJ Burton cited throughout with permission.

am attempting to play out the intellectual Mobius strip that is implied by Gilles Deleuze's observation that, "Modes of life inspire ways of thinking; modes of thinking create ways of living" (Deleuze, 2001, p.66). I am challenged to think through the layers of *living and thinking*. Video with its facets of sound and image offers the poetic possibilities, gaps and spaces for imagination appropriate to the task.

Skating is a direct road into the future.
 Skating is like having a Minor Super
 Power.
 By the sheer act of doing nothing more
 than putting wheels on the bottom of your
 feet,
 you now have a Minor Super Power.
 You can't fly, but you can *glide*!
 Gliding over the surface of the earth!
 Gliding! Gliding!
 Oh! Look out! Here comes Glide Man!
 He's gliding by! Gliding! Gliding!
 Right on the surface of the earth!
 Can't really fly but he can *glide*!



The work that is discussed in this paper is a 4:10 minute video, *Skating* (Cooley & Burton, 2007) produced in collaborating with my friend and colleague, PJ Burton. The tape is not a scripted, tightly planned production but rather one that evolved through a more organic and contemplative approach. Over a period of time we engaged in a dialogic process of proposing ideas, imagining images and sounds, playing with possibilities, and shooting the images that would realized those ideas in visual form. My overarching inquiry was into the relationships and poetic possibilities, gaps, and spaces for imagination in the video medium. These creative processes, and the ideas of identity and loss central to the work played out via the video, *Skating*.

Heat - amplified by the humidity,
 and shimmering when you see it off the road
 in the distance, so that when you move through this stuff it feels
 like you are actually going through another dimension.
 It feels like you are actually - you are in fact - moving through time.
 It's as if you can feel the passage of time. You can feel the past –
 receding.
 You can feel the present receding into the past and you can see
 yourself going into the future.

The pervasive visual element is of an inline skater's sustained movement along a pathway that cuts though a bleached, sun



dazzled, late summer landscape towards a scorched, diseased grove of trees, culminating in a blazingly white space.

The hand held camera records the passing landscape and the skater's rhythmic movement. The ambient sound is of wind in aspen leaves, skate wheels moving over asphalt, and the inhale / exhale of breath. An additional track of gently percussive music underlies those sounds.

Initially the narration draws me into the skater's joy of movement and then into the narrative of how the obsessive practicing of skating opens a way for coming to terms with his mother's decline into dementia.

You can see that as you are leaving scenery behind, you are leaving life experiences, and people, and aspects of your family behind as well. So that would include my Mom, who has gently, as of now, gently slipped away into a kind of a vestibule, some sort of a holding facility, or some kind of a waiting room. It used to really choke me up, but now that I am really *good* at visiting her, it's actually just sort of ... calming, normal. It's like I just go and visit Mom and what we do is we just endlessly walk around.



Video, a quintessential postmodern medium constituted by the luminous electronic play of fragments of sound and image, is eminently conducive to exploring the representation of the complexity of identity formation within an ever shifting contemporary culture. The image is perpetually in flux, never completely realized, resistant to notions of a single perception leading to a universal or fixed meaning “on what could be called the borderline between the visible and invisible – at what Deleuze calls the frontier between the outside and the inside” (Ross 1988-9, p.16). Video affords us the opportunity to play back and forth across that frontier to illuminate our understanding in both outer and inner spaces as well as the intimacy of their interrelationship.

As editor of *Skating*, I had the responsibility of taking the abundance of image and sound that we had generated and shaping it for myself and other viewers. That process is analogous to the conventional qualitative research practice of “data analysis” wherein the tapes are viewed and re-viewed, letting the significance of the images emerge, and selecting the fragments that resonate with my sense of meaning as the project develops. Editing is loaded with the possibility and responsibility of rendering a moment of aesthetic insight from a plethora of possibilities. There are broad and complex implications of this particular practice of *assemblage*, and consequently, the concept of *assemblage* as it is used in Deleuze and Guatari’s work, is valuable for considering the creative processes of video production.



Assemblage suggests to the English speaker an assembled, put together object. However, it is a concept that encompasses a more complex sensibility. The term in French is *agencement* “usually translated as ‘putting together’, ‘arranging’, ‘laying out’, ‘layout’, or ‘fitting’” (Cousin et al. 1990: p. 9-10 cited in Wise, 2005, p.77). It is important to note that *agencement* is not a static term: it is not *the* arrangement or organization but the *process* of arranging, organizing, fitting together (Wise, 2005, p.77). *Assemblage*, like the video image, is always in the process of becoming. The editing process enacts the process of *assemblage* as the segments of image and sound are placed in relationship to each other to become not simply the aggregate of these pieces but a dynamic creation that exceeds the quantification of its parts. It is active over time and hence we can know what *assemblage* is when we know what it does.

Assemblage carries the sense of being “a whole of some sort that expresses some identity and claims a territory” (p.77). In the video, the skater moves through the space and in doing so he claims the terrain of each stride along the trail, and as each stride moves into the next, that territory is made, unmade, re-territorialized and de-territorialized in the instant he passes through it. As with *assemblage*, there is a constant making and unmaking of experience that I, now in the role of viewer, make and unmake within the space of my own experience of viewing.



Although I was intimately involved in conceptualizing, directing, and editing the video – the functions of this particular medium and creative practice, my position in the end, is that of a viewer. I am involved not simply in seeing the images and hearing the sounds but also in the creative act of trying to drawing together my immediate perceptions of the video with other aspects of my experience and knowledge. As I watch, the “mechanical eye” of the camera draws my view through the parched landscape, along the pathway that cuts through the small poplars and underbrush. The rhythmic movement of the image, the rumble of the skate wheels, and the sounds of breathing tell me that the camera is moving with a skater even though he does not turn the camera on himself. As the early Russian filmmaker Vertov observed, this mechanical eye is not merely a transparent recorder of life’s events. It plays a dynamic role in giving me, the viewer, a mobile, sustained look into a particular place and time, the duration of which leaves me time and space to be curious about why I am being propelled through this hallucinogenic mad dash. But simultaneously I have been invited to “glide across the surface of the earth”, and to indulge vicariously in the momentum of a “Minor Super Power”. I am invited to abandon worldly concerns and enjoy the ride.



I also come to apprehend that there is an underlying painful reality unraveling. As a viewer I at first try to stand apart from the anguish of his mother's illness as the skater relates how he has come to a certain point of acceptance. In the end, he reveals a struggle that, although the details may vary, is too familiar to those of us with aging or ill parents who live far away from us. Ultimately the montage of physical, rhythmic movement, images passing, droning sound, and hints of melody is a meditation on comprehending one's encounters with hard experiences in life and the shaping of identity in the face of loss and our own perceived inadequacies.

The thing is that you go from a really, really happy, *lively* person as my mother was, to an individual who is wracked with Alzheimer's. I feel that she is migrating. This is the way that I look at it. I feel like she started off 100% here and 0% migrated, and then it was, you know, 90% here, 10% migrated, 'till finally it was 50/50. Now she's maybe 10% here and 90% of her soul has actually migrated away. You know, it's like a Woody Allen line where he says, "I'm not afraid of death. I just don't want to be there when it happens." And, in fact, my Mom *won't* be. She'll already be gone.



How do any of us know ourselves in the fragmented, ever changing epoch in which we live? How do we move through the resisting forces of the world and still stay standing? Questions of how our experiencing of the external world shapes our sense of self and identity comes to the fore. Personal losses and the constraints on creative, imaginative, engaged living imposed by hardship and conventional social expectations have been lamented by many, from coffee house radicals to wise scholars such as Maxine Greene who insists that,

To resist such tendencies is to become aware of the ways in which certain dominant social practices enclose us in molds or frames, define us in accord with extrinsic demands, discourage us from going beyond ourselves, from acting on possibility".
(Maxine Greene, 1995, p. 112)

How might teachers and students come to understand our own experience and enjoy the possibilities of imaginative, creative lives where we can go beyond ourselves and act on possibility? Numerous scholars and theorists have addressed the question and some in particular have informed my understanding. Bahktin (1992) proposed that such insight could come through an effort to bridge the gap between self and Other through a genuine openness to the dialogic engagement with that which is outside oneself. Winnicott (1971) proposed the negotiation of external challenges via a turn to creative practices in various aspects of life. To continue with the ideas presented in Deleuze's work, the concept of *plier* (to fold) proposes the notion of the folding in of the outside into the inside, which brings experiences in the external world into our construction of our sense of self-identity. Put succinctly into real-life terms, Burton (personal communication, 2006) illuminated the latter perspective when he meditated upon coming to terms with the challenges of life.

But it takes having the *crap* knocked out of you before you realize that it's not just about something coming in and then losing that thing, and then attempting to fill the vacuum with a new acquisition. [. . .] Things change, but you never lose anything; you don't really lose any experiences. It's all part of you. You're the summation of every experience that you've ever had . . . ever. [. . .] You lose stuff, you lose things, you can lose money, you can lose marriages, you can lose friends, but in the grand scheme of things they are still part of you. It's part of something that shaped you, and certainly, any kind of family . . . your're walking around with all kinds of stuff remembered or not, that informs your direction and the way you use life.



Skating is but the most recent in a series of artworks through which I inquire into the creative processes through my engagement in such practices. This engagement gives me a few more pieces of the puzzle as I learn more about how people learn and create. Insights evolve from drawing together or “constructing” knowledge through the integration of practice and theory leading to “descriptive awareness, explanatory insight, and powerful understanding” (Sullivan 2005, p. 100) and I endeavor to fold that understanding into my life and work. Although educational institutions seem to be insistently pragmatic and persistently restrictive towards imaginative and creative practices, active engagement in creative production have been the cornerstone of art education practice for generations. We persist in the notion that through effort and imagination we can envision the possibility of being a *Minor Super Hero* and we can engage in the myriad process of *assemblage* that create the life and society we desire.

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Where I'm From:

I am from sweets in a glass jar in Grandma's shop
From fish and chips and the clink of milk bottles early in the morning.
I am from frosted glass doors, a Noddy eggcup with a blue, felt hat,
And a hot water bottle warming my bed.
I am from Granddad's roses, the smell of rain and lavender,
And skipping rope on a cobblestone street.

I am from Geckos on my bedroom wall
And wading in the street after Monsoon.
From the smell of sewage and beeping horns on the way to the British Overseas School.
I am from Rhinoceros Beetles, camels, chappatis, and "Baksheesh, Memsaab".
From watching women carry water jugs on their heads,
And hearing their chatter and clinking bracelets fading into the desert.

I am from riding my bike to meet my dad walking home from work,
From tent caterpillars, macramé,
And Flintstones at lunchtime.
From Black Cat gum and Pixie Sticks bought in Provisoior.
I am from losing my sister when I was ten...
From getting my own room,
And painting it bittersweet mauve.

I am from kimchi, men driving Hyundias with white gloves,
And stones stacked up against hillsides.
I am from walking along rice paddies
And around burial mounds.
From bus trips into Pusan, a red hooded sweater with pockets for my hands,
adolescent firsts: love, and Peach wine.
I am from locals pushing, touching my hair,
And making a wish.

I am from two uncles who are artists
And a teacher who held up my pictures.
From parents who said, "Do what you love."
I am from doing what I love
And being the responsible first-born I was taught to be.